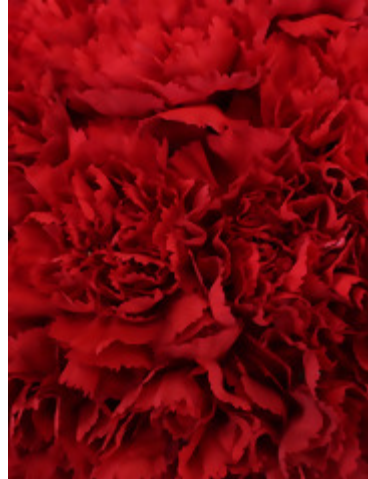




## **The Language of Flowers by Your Iron Lung**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Angst, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy H., Steve H.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-11-01 13:45:26

**Updated:** 2018-11-01 13:45:26

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 23:02:23

**Rating:** K

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 1,995

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Sometimes love manifests itself as a disease; nigh incurable and invariably fatal. Hanahaki, they call it- the disease of flowers. Billy knew Steve's pretty, pretty face was dangerous, and now it was killing him.

## The Language of Flowers

Of course it happens in the middle of a game.

He's on his knees, shoved to the floor by some faceless goon on the enemy team when the coughing starts. It's a sputter at first, but it becomes more and more aggressive, wracking his body with each cough as his lungs work to expel the blockage inside them.

Billy hacks and haws into his hand, unable to rise or stop the coughing, aware that everyone in the gymnasium is focused on him, watching him, and *of course* it's Steve that approaches him first- asks if he's alright, offers his hand to help him up and then leans down with a worried expression when he doesn't.

He tries to gesture for Steve to fuck off, but he can't as he finally throws up in the middle of the court. There's red all over the wood paneling, and some of its blood, yeah, but most of it is-

"Holy shit dude," Steve mutters under his breath, and all Billy can do is gasp for air now that he's finished coughing up the red flower petals that've been growing in his lungs like a cancer for weeks.

"Fuck off," Billy wheezes in response, and he's glad for once that they're playing an away game. Not that it would stop the rumors from spreading; by noon tomorrow the entire miserable town of Hawkins will know he's dying.

Steve backs off when Billy stands up, angrily shoving his way through his teammates to make it towards the locker room, the evidence of his affections left on the floor in a gruesome display for everyone to gawk over.

No one follows after him. His team wins the game without him.

The onslaught of gossip that reaches his ears when he steps foot in the school halls the next day is all-encompassing; it's all anyone can talk about, how there's a girl out there somewhere that Billy Hargrove *can't* have. He manages to dodge the topic, refusing to answer the questions that come to those suffering from the incurable

disease and tries to live out the day as normally as possible.

Tommy brings it up at lunch though, as Billy starts to cough over his food. He watches him hack up a few petals with disgust instead of pity and asks, "Who is she, man? Can't you just fuck her and get over it?"

Once he stops coughing, Billy reaches across the table and punches Tommy in the face.

It devolves into a full-blown fistfight right there in the lunchroom. He hits Tommy over and over, beating his face bloody but ultimately loses when another coughing fit consumes him and the school's administration steps in. The carnation petals he leaves in his wake as he's escorted to the nurse catch everyone's eye but Steve's.

It doesn't surprise him that the school calls his dad about it; informs him that his son is dying because he loves someone who doesn't love him back, and when he gets home, Neil Hargrove really lays into him about it.

"I bet it's some *boy*," he rages, yelling loudly enough for everyone in the house to hear. He admonishes his son in the kitchen, face red with embarrassment and anger. "You just *had* to drag your faggot habits with you when we moved here, didn't you?!"

And Billy says fuck it. If he's going to die, then he might as well go out guns blazing.

"Yeah, it's because of a *boy*," he hisses, the shame he can't help but feel coloring his face and wetting his eyes. He's prepared for the first hit, takes it across the face and stays standing long enough to yell, "I'm going to die because of a *boy*, and you're the one who's going to have to live with that!"

He starts coughing then and throws up on his feet, blood and petals staining his boots red and it's enough to get his father to leave him alone, barking at him to clean the mess up before he comes back to rub his nose in it, as though he were a misbehaving dog who'd just pissed on the carpet.

Max walks in on him while he's scrubbing the linoleum. She watches him quietly, eyes darting from the floor tiles to the bucket filled with red water and flower petals. He ignores her, but can't ignore the painful stabbing sensations in his chest as he works.

"Is it true?" she asks, just as everyone has asked him. "You like... a boy?"

"Yeah," he replies, voice hoarse with the strain of repressing another coughing fit. He can't see the point in lying to her.

"Who?"

Billy sighs and coughs slightly, putting the back of his hand to his mouth to keep it contained.

"What does it matter who?" he says as he comes to a stand, dropping the brush he used to scrub the floor into the sink basin. He carries the bucket with him as he makes his way to the front door, intending to dump the dirty, bloody water into the earth outside.

She follows him, watches as the water spills over the rim and onto the ground. "What's the point in keeping it to yourself if he's just going to kill you in the end anyway?"

Max's words hang in the air without response. Billy stares down at the mess that hasn't yet seeped into the dirt and thinks of Steve, and all the aches and pains that follow the thought.

"Harrington," he says at last, and imagines he can feel the prickling sensation of the all the flowers' little roots burrowing deeper into his lungs as he says his name. "*Steve.*"

Max keeps her thoughts to herself and watches silently as Billy throws up again; the only one to bear witness to his decay as his blood and petals splash into the soil.

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"There's a surgery you can get, you know."

Billy hasn't been to school in a week, and looks dead when he does show up. His face is hollow, his eyes are sunken, and he's lost some of

the mass he was proud to have had. The coughing fits keep him up at night, and will keep ravaging his body until it eventually kills him. He wanted to come to school to confess, because if the secret was going to kill him, then he might at least *tell* Steve about it.

There's sympathy in Steve's eye when he talks.

"I had it once." Steve looks away, forlorn and saddened, and Billy hurts for him. "When Nancy dumped me. I just couldn't get over her, but I didn't want to let it kill me. You don't have to let it kill you, either. There are alternatives."

And he explains it all to him; explains how the surgery removes the invasive flowering bud growing in his lungs, and how the feelings he has will be removed with it and how much *better* he'll feel once it's all gone.

"I mean, why let yourself suffer over someone who doesn't even like you back, right? We miss having you on the team, man. You don't have to let it end like this."

Billy imagines himself shoving Steve into a locker, desperate and angry. He imagines himself telling Steve that it's for him, it's all for him, but backs down before he can even make half an effort. Instead he studies Steve's beautiful, pretty face and shrugs and says, "Maybe my life just isn't worth living. You ever think of that?"

Steve snorts. "Then there are faster ways to kill yourself, dude. Suicide isn't painless, but yours doesn't have to be."

Billy mulls over his words and cuts the rest of his classes; spends the whole day driving around too fast and goes home that night to announce to his dad that maybe there is a cure for his homosexuality after all, and the surgery is scheduled within the week- if he can survive for that long.

That night, as he's huddled over the toilet, dry heaving until the petals come, he can't breathe. He coughs and he coughs, but it doesn't clear the blockage in his throat. It's massive, unlike anything else that he's coughed up before, and he panics, heaves, and tries, desperately, to work it out. He reaches in for it and struggles to grasp it, but

eventually manages to pull the blossom free, stem and all. Billy stares at the full bloom in awe for a moment before dropping it into the toilet bowl to be flushed away.

The doctor who sees him is nice. She assures him it'll be a quick procedure, but despite her kindness he knows she's lying. He knows he's in a bad way and already has one foot out the door. There'll be precautions. It won't be routine. She lies to him, and he thanks her for it as she puts him under and wheels him away to the operating room.

But she wasn't lying; not entirely. The surgery is a success, and as he wakens out of his drug-induced sleep, his doctor is there, standing by his bedside. She smiles at him, and he realizes she's holding something behind her back that she wants him to see.

"What is that?" he slurs, struggling to keep his eyes open as she shows him the removed emotion.

The flower bulb is large and rests comfortably in her palms. The flower is in bloom, with large carnation blossoms sprouting from the top of the bulb, and she wonders, distantly, how he was able to hold on for so long.

"That's it? That's all?"

"That's all," she affirms, still smiling.

"Can I smell it?" he asks. His voice is hoarse and quiet, but she hears him and steps forward to let him sniff.

He expects it to smell like Steve in some regard; of his hair spray, or his cologne, or even his sweat, but instead the flower is rancid. It smells like antiseptic and stomach bile. Disappointed, he closes his eyes and thinks of Steve, trying to conjure back the emotions he'd felt before, but all he can feel towards him now is anger and remorse.

Billy can feel his eyes watering and turns away from the flower and the doctor, rejecting everything the flower represents. She's not surprised; she's seen it a thousand times before. He gets discharged later in the day, wounded, but no longer dying. Saved from the pain,

but still hurting.

The doctor puts the bulb in a biohazard bin per standard regulations, but takes the bin home with her at the end of her shift. She carries it out to her garden, where a hundred different flowers grow. They're beautiful to her and grow year round, regardless of the weather. All of them are salvaged from people like Billy, and she finds space beside some roses to plant his unrequited love. Not every flower saved grows, but she hopes this one does. The thing with carnations is that they're beautiful, but rare, and don't often grow so heartily in people. She wonders whether or not Billy's carnation will take root in the earth as strongly as it took root in him, and hopes it does. It will serve as a beautiful monument what might have been if his love had been returned.

She stands up and wipes her dirty hands on her jeans and looks at her garden somberly. So many lives saved, but just as many loves lost.